Photography, Cinema, and the Ghostly: a short introduction

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As a medium, cinema possesses a photographic nature. In his important article on the "photographic image", André Bazin discusses the "essential objectivity" (2002, 13) shared by both cinema and photography. However, cinema adds time and movement to that photographic substrate, moving it closer to an idea of spectacle that dates back to older media and forms, such as the Magic Lantern and Phantasmagoria. Thus, cinema falls within a history of *haunted media,* and the place it occupies in this history was researched and discussed by Laurent Mannoni in his seminal book, *Le Grand art de la lumière et de l'ombre: archéologie du cinéma,* where he carries out a detailed and convincing excavation of cinema's spectral antecedents (Mannoni 1999).

Less than a year after the first public film screening by the Lumière brothers, in December 1895, Georges Méliès, an illusionist who became a film director (at a time when ideas of authorship were still far from being associated to film practice), begins to explore the magical and oneiric potential that he finds in this new mode of representation, directing fantasy films that are inhabited by supernatural creatures and situations. From this gallery of fabulous beings, the ghost is one of the most notorious, appearing in such remarkable works as *Le Manoir du diable* (1896) and *Le Château hanté* (1897).

The ghost would become a recurring figure in the history of cinema, from the 19th century to today and across the globe. Its presence is felt mainly in the horror film genre, from the silent era (*Körkarlen*, by Victor Sjöström, 1921) to Netflix (*I Am the Pretty Thing That Lives in the House*, by Osgood Perkins, 2016), from mainstream cinema (*Poltergeist*,

by Tobe Hooper, 1982) to *film d'auteur* (*Schalcken the Painter*, by Leslie Megahey, 1979), and from Indian (*Mahal*, by Kamal Amrohi, 1949) to Japanese cinematography (*Kwaidan*, by Masaki Kobayashi, 1965). But ghosts also haunted, and still haunt, other genres such as: comedy (*Blithe Spirit*, by David Lean, 1945), animation (*Fantasmagorie,* by Émile Cohl, 1908), historical drama (*Ugetsu*, by Kenji Mizoguchi, 1953), war film (*J'Accuse*, by Abel Gance, 1919 and 1938), melodrama (*Odete*, by João Pedro Rodrigues, 2005), among others. At times the ghost has been rather explicit and on other occasions it has exercised a subtle presence, hiding in the conceptual horizon of the films, as in *Phantom Lady*, a film noir by Robert Siodmak (1944), the low-budget western *Unexpected Guest*, by George Archainbaud (1947), or in a myriad of documentary films, of which some notable examples include *A Ilha de Moraes*, by Paulo Rocha (1984), or *Santiago*, by João Moreira Salles (2007).

In fact, cinema quickly developed an association with the vast literary tradition that was shaped between the mid-19th century and the first quarter of the 20th century, and that made use of the spectre to question reality, truth and the limits of human knowledge. Whether through adaptation or indirect inspiration, the ghosts of authors such as Charles Dickens, Edgar Allan Poe, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Georges Rodenbach, Guy de Maupassant, Henry James, H.P. Lovecraft, H.G. Wells, among many others, haunt the history of cinema.

However, and similarly to what happens in photography, when we speak of ghosts in cinema we are not only referring to a figure or a topic. The spectrality of this form of (artistic) representation precedes the thematic level and is related to its own ontology. The spectre is both a theme and a theoretical problem. On the one hand, ghosts inhabit cinema since its early days, summoning into the films the domain of spectrality through figurative representation. But then again, cinema was insistently conceptualized as a spectral art, independently of whether or not ghosts were summoned or figured in films.

Maxim Gorky realized that spectral nature when, in 1896, he published his impressions in a newspaper regarding a presentation of short films he had watched by the Lumière brothers. In the operative opposition that is usually established between the Lumières and Méliès, one would say that the former would be on the side of realism, while the latter would be on the side of spectrality. However, Gorky identified the spectrality inherent to the former — and, consequently, to all of cinema with a "photographic" or "realist" base —, by describing as a "kingdom of shadows" the world seen in the films directed by the Lumières: "not life, but the appearance of life" (2008, 48). Gorky invented the "cliché" (Cholodenko 2013, 99) in which everything that we see on screen is nothing but apparitions, ghosts, shadows, spectres. And this is a "cliché" that was, in fact, pursued with seriousness and a significant intellectual commitment by several scholars that recognized the ghost as cinema's "ur figure" (*ibid.*).

After Gorky and to this day, the metaphor of the ghost would resurface frequently in reflections on cinema. In the 1920s, Béla Balázs argues that "there is no written or

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oral literature that expresses the ghostly, the demonic or the supernatural as adequately as cinema" (2010, 59). In the important interview given in 2001 to *Cahiers du Cinéma*, and fittingly titled "Le cinéma et ses fantômes", Jacques Derrida stresses the "spectral structure that passes through the cinematographic image" (77). Derrida, and thinkers such as Edgar Morin — who wrote that "in cinema, the ghost is not a simple efflorescence. It plays a genetic and structural role" (1956, 59) —, defend that cinema *is*, in its singular ontological vagueness, a spectral art.

In recent decades, we have witnessed the emergence of the "spectral turn" (described and challenged by Murray Leeder in 2017, 21ff.), in which cinema has been considered under new angles and contextualized in a broader and more comprehensive framework of the history of *spectral media*. "The Ghost in the Machine: Spectral Media" is the exact formulation used by María Pilar del Blanco and Esther Peeren in the introductory text of the section dedicated to media in their *The Spectralities Reader*. Based on an essay by Tom Gunning, they propose that cinema reflects on "its very history — a history of vision and the persistence of the ambiguous dialectic between the visible and the invisible" (2013, 202). Also in recent years, in *Supernatural Entertainments: Victorian Spiritualism and the Rise of Modern Media Culture*, Simone Natale (2016) researches nineteenth century spiritualism, as a spectacle and a consumer product, while also analysing its decisive contribution to the emergence of cinema. In *The Modern Supernatural and the Beginnings of Cinema*, Murray Leeder (2017) places cinema within a history that also encompasses unrelated phenomena such as mesmerism and x-rays. It was also Leeder who, in 2015, organised the first collection of essays exclusively dedicated to ghosts in cinema, titled *Cinematic Ghosts: Haunting and Spectrality from Silent Cinema to the Digital Era* and collecting texts on such different works as *The Cat and the Canary*, by Paul Leni (1927) and *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010), by Apichatpong Weerasethakul.

But which characteristics or qualities specific to cinema allow us to (re)conceptualize it as spectral art?

Taking into account their nature, which to some extent is common, photography and cinema possess the capacity to enable all beings to be preserved, to stay among the living in the form of an image, far beyond their physical disappearance. Thus, the two arts connect, aesthetically speaking, at a meeting point of life and death. Still within the scope of the characteristics that cinema inherits from photography, its "pseudo-presence" (Sontag 2005, 12) materializes it as a double of a lost original. Thirdly, and in the sphere of phenomenology and the materiality of images, it should be stressed that cinema — distancing itself from photography — only comes into existence when it is projected. That is to say, unlike photography, cinema is fulfilled over the period of time in which light prints on a screen forms that may be seen but are not tangible. Therefore, the precarious and elusive materiality of cinema also becomes analogous to the materiality of the spectre. Finally, and as a consequence of the third aspect, it is worth highlighting

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the spectrality that is inherent to the act of seeing a film. In the previously mentioned interview, Derrida uses the word *séance* (session) (2001, 77) given its polysemy, as the term in French has a dual meaning, "going to the cinema to see a film" as well as "participating in a spiritualist session". Indeed, seeing a film at the cinema implies — from a psychological but also material point of view — being haunted by the ghosts projected on the screen, and whose light — the light that they are made of — refracts in space and reaches us. Furthermore, "being covered in shadows" is actually one of the meanings of "being haunted".

Thus, we can briefly circumscribe the concept of spectre by emphasising the way in which it enables a particularly appropriate and instigating approach within the scope of film studies. Not only does the spectre inhabit cinema since its very beginning, but it also shares with it a fundamental characteristic of being a figure at the threshold of: life and death, the animate and the inanimate, the past and the present, the material and the intangible, belonging simultaneously to the domains of vision and the invisible.

It is by enhancing this overall vision that we ascertain that the relationship between photography and spectrality occurs since its beginnings. It is much like cinema, whether going through the ontology of the device, or as a figure that invades the photographic practice in diverse moments of its history and in very different forms, depending on how it emerges within the context of one's belief in magic, religion, art or philosophical speculation.

The idea (and practice) of photography as the recording of spectres goes as far back as 1840, when Hippolyte Bayard, frustrated with the fact that Daguerre had been considered the inventor of photography, takes a self-portrait that is allegedly *post mortem*. On the back of his photo titled "Drowned self-portrait" he wrote: "Here lies Hippolyte Bayard...", stating that 'the disgraced' had drowned out of despair, and suggesting that people step aside because he should already be decaying.... This is therefore a photo 'from the other world', contemporary to Edgar Allan Poe's "Mesmeric Revelation" (1844), in which the author narrates an episode from the past with a dying man that had spoken after being physically dead, in other words, from 'another world'. Balzac was another famous figure that was suspicious of the occult (or *occultist*) powers of photography. The French author thought that the human being was composed of several layers of spectres, and that photography would extract, with each shot, one of those layers (Nadar 1899, 14).

At the very beginning of *La Chambre Claire*, Barthes speaks of photography's spectral dimension when he points to three vectors of the photographic operation: the *operator*, the *spectator* and the *spectrum*: *spectre* "because this word conserves, in its root, a relationship with performance", but also because all photography allows for the "return of the dead" (Barthes 1980. 22-23).

Unlike cinema, which is theoretically connected with the ghostly through the projection and movement of "shadows", photography summons the life/death binomial through

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a standstill of time, which led Kracauer to affirm that in photography a person's history is buried under his/her photograph "as if under a layer of snow" (Kracauer 1927, 207). The duplication of reality proposed by the photographic standstill echoes Freud's *Unheimlich*, independently of the actual contents of the photograph. Philippe Dubois (1984) speaks of *thanatography*, which would define the intrinsic and essential relationship between photography and death; the photograph would be a kind of Medusa that petrifies everything, a machine that transforms movement into stasis, immobilization.

But there is a whole history of ghosts in photography in figurative terms as well. Evidence of the revisiting of the dead occupies a very specific period: at an initial phase, it is a period dominated by spiritism mainly in the United States of America and in England, between 1863 and 1880. This is when what has been conventionally called spirit or ghost photography was produced. At a second phase, dominated by theories of fluids and auras (Hippolyte Baraduc, Luys and David, Ochorowicz, among others), photographic representation becomes abstract and only vaguely figurative, and the images are understood as the depiction of the subject's interior world, which is 'directly' inscribed in photographic plates. Furthermore, and during that period, a more playful approach to the ghostly emerged. It focused on the photography of 'ghosts' as a form of recreation and entertainment (still in the 19th century and already advocated by David Brewster, in 1856, in his book about the history of the stereoscope), which was also the case in literature, Oscar Wilde's *The Canterville Ghost* (1887) being an example.

It is important to emphasise that the productive relationship of the photograph with the 'spirits' resides in the fact that it is the apodictic nature of the former, its *documental* value, that guarantees the reality of the represented: the well-known photographers that made 'spirit' and 'fluid' images insisted on highlighting their "non-aesthetic character", seeing them simply as *proof*, i.e. referring them to a fundamental characteristic of photography: indexicality.

In the article "Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations: Spirit Photography, Magic Theater, Trick Films, and Photography's Uncanny", Tom Gunning establishes a close connection between Méliès's cinema of magic tricks and ghosts, the performances of white magic introduced in France by Robert Houdin and spirit photography from the 1860s. According to this author, that is the apodictic strength of photography, alongside its double character which ensures both the possibility of the production of credible phantasmagoric images and their reception as *haunting*. Given that photography was received as an instrument of positivity and evidence, it was also "an uncanny phenomenon, one which seemed to undermine the unique identities of objects, creating a parallel world of phantasmatic doubles alongside the concrete world of senses as verified by positivism" (Gunning 1995, 18).

But the phantasmagoric effects, or those suggestive of other realities that are less sensitive in photography, have never ceased in taking other directions that are less directly connected to religious beliefs or occult systems of thought: in surrealism, with

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Man Ray's "solarizations" and "rayographs", or with the blurred portrait he made of Marquise Casati; in the cultural and aesthetic reception of x-ray photographs during the first two decades of the 20th century; in the "photodynamic" photographs of Futurist Antonio Giulio Bragaglia, made in 1910, where the stroboscopic movement causes drag and creates *haunting* effects. Later, from 1960 onwards, artists such as Francesca Woodman, Ralph Eugene Meatyard, Sigmar Polke, Lourdes Castro, Anna and Bernhard Blume, also used photography — producing, among others, effects of partial or complete blurring of fixed images — to suggest dimensions that were not directly palpable, or to introduce 'disorder' and uncertainty in a rationality that they considered dubious.

With the advent of the digital, the ontological question of spectrality in photography and cinema came to the forefront once again. For one thing, the apocalyptic fears concerning the supposed "death of cinema" and "death of photography" led to an intense meditation on their properties, a reflection that is already marked by a nostalgic mood; nevertheless, given the dematerialized appearance of the images, projected from an electronic device or saved on a computer — without celluloid support, subject to disappearing by pressing a computer keyboard, being at the same time more durable and fragile —, films and photographs acquire that ghostly dimension: they have and don't have a *body*, they exist but are not palpable.

With this range of questions and problems as a backdrop, this new issue of the *Journal of Communication and Languages* gathers a set of articles of a highly heterogeneous nature, with the aim of accounting for a set of aporias that place cinema and photography in a highly productive relationship with the ideas of spectre and ghost. With approaches that are at times more historical and other times more analytical, and focusing on a diversified network of media objects — photographs, films, and others —, this collection aims to contribute to the ongoing discussion concerning the reflexive potential of the ghost within the study of (audio)visual arts and other media.

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